

James Tait Black Prizes – 2023 winners announced

The winners of the UK's oldest book awards have just been announced and they are both American.

The books include a reimagining of Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* and a memoir about the New York literary scene in the 1970s and 1980s.

American writers Barbara Kingsolver and Darryl Pinckney join the glittering line-up of authors whose books have won the James Tait Black Prizes which are presented by the University of Edinburgh since 1919 – are the only major British book prizes judged by literature scholars and students.

Barbara Kingsolver

Barbara Kingsolver's winning book in the £10,000 fiction prize, *Demon Copperhead*, published by Faber, is a poignant novel set in the Appalachian Mountains in Virginia.

By transposing Dickens' *David Copperfield* to contemporary times, it tells the story of the struggles and triumphs of a young boy born into poverty as he navigates foster care, labour exploitation, addiction, love and loss.

Best-selling novelist Kingsolver, who lives in the Appalachia area of the United States, is the author of several acclaimed books and works of poetry. *Demon Copperhead* is her 10th novel.

Fiction Judge Dr Benjamin Bateman, of the University of Edinburgh, called *Demon Copperhead* "a captivating piece of

realist literature which is exceptional across all of the dimensions we look for”.

He said: “Demon Copperhead brings together past and present, repurposing the social realism of Charles Dickens’ David Copperfield to address the current opioid epidemic in Appalachia. It is a searing indictment of corporate greed, a sensitive exploration of a community too often written off, and a hopeful endorsement of the healing power of art.”

Darryl Pinckney

Darryl Pinckney’s winning book in the £10,000 biography prize, *Come Back in September: A Literary Education on West Sixty-Seventh Street, Manhattan*, published by Riverrun, is a memoir about the writer’s apprenticeship with authors Elizabeth Hardwick and Barbara Epstein, and his introduction to the New York literary scene.

Pinckney lives in New York and has published two other novels and several collections of essays covering topics such as African-American literature, politics, race, and other cultural issues.

Biography Judge Dr Simon Cooke, of the University of Edinburgh, called *Come Back in September: A Literary Education on West Sixty-Seventh Street, Manhattan* “thoroughly absorbing: a vivid, nuanced, and moving tribute to Elizabeth Hardwick, a fascinating portrait of a place, time, and milieu, and a profound meditation on memory, friendship, and the literary life”.

He said: “The Biography panel found *Come Back in September* a literary memoir of great generosity in its sense of tribute to others, and a formally fascinating inquiry into the diverse idioms of life-writing. It strikes many notes, fusing dazzling conversational wit and poised elegy, and the sentences are so supple, surprising, and graceful – it’s a masterclass in tonal

integrity. The book stayed with us, and we feel sure we'll keep coming back to it."

The James Tait Black Prizes are for the best works of fiction and biography during the previous 12 months.

The academic integrity of the judging process is a hallmark of the James Tait Black Prizes. Each year the academic judge in each category works with a panel of doctoral researchers to critically assess the shortlisted works and decide on the winner.

Barbara Kingsolver's book was chosen from a fiction shortlist that featured: *Bitter Orange Tree* by Jokha Alharthi, translated from the Arabic by Marilyn Booth (Scribner, Simon & Schuster); *Bolla* by Pajtim Statovci, translated from Finnish by David Hackston (Faber & Faber); and *After Sappho* by Selby Wynn Schwartz (Galley Beggar Press).

Darryl Pinckney's book wins after topping a biography shortlist also featuring *Homesick* by Jennifer Croft (Charco Press); *A Line in the World: A Year on the North Sea Coast by Dorthé Nors*, translated from Danish by Caroline Waight (Pushkin Press); (Riverrun); and *A History of Water: Being an Account of a Murder, an Epic and Two Visions of Global History* by Edward Wilson-Lee (William Collins).

The prizes are awarded by the University of Edinburgh's English Literature department, which is the oldest in the world.

Despite being a century old, the prizes continue to evolve, with greater student involvement in choosing this year's winners.

A new James Tait Black Visiting Writers series has been launched this year. The programme will feature visits to the University from previous shortlisted and winning authors.

Since 2017 the University has run a free online course in partnership with Edinburgh International Book Festival to offer readers the chance to engage with judges and other readers on the shortlisted fiction books.

The Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) – called ‘How to Read a Novel’ – draws on the James Tait Black fiction shortlist and to date has attracted more than 60,000 participants from across the globe.

In an event at the Edinburgh International Festival this August author Jokha Alharthi and translator Marilyn Booth will be in conversation with fiction judge, Benjamin Bateman about *Bitter Orange Tree*, which was among the eight exceptional books shortlisted for this year’s James Tait Black Prizes.

The James Tait Black Prizes began celebrating books more than a century ago after Janet Tait Black née Coats – part of the renowned thread-making family J & P Coats – made provision in her will for the creation of two book prizes to be awarded annually in memory of her husband, James Tait Black.





BARBARA KINGSOLVER

DEMON COPPERHEAD

*'Without a doubt
the best book
I'll read this year.'*

KATE ATKINSON

'Electrifying.'
DAILY MAIL

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

ff

Darryl Pinckney

Come Back in September



A Literary
Education on
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Manhattan

